

# The Canonicity of the Bible—Part One

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(from *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Book House, 1999)

*Canonicity* (Fr. *canon*, rule or norm) refers to the normative or authoritative books inspired by God for inclusion in Holy Scripture. Canonicity is determined by God. It is not the antiquity, authenticity, or religious community that makes a book canonical or authoritative. A book is valuable because it is canonical, and not canonical because it is or was considered valuable. Its authority is *established* by God and merely *discovered* by God's people.

**Definition of Canonicity.** The distinction between God's determination and human discovery is essential to the correct view of canonicity, and should be drawn carefully:

## The Authority Relationship Between Church and Canon

### Incorrect View

The church is determiner of the canon.  
The church is mother of the canon.  
The church is magistrate of the canon.  
The church is regulator of the canon.  
The church is judge of the canon.  
The church is master of the canon.

### Biblical View

The church is discoverer of the canon.  
The church is child of the canon.  
The church is minister of the canon.  
The church is recognizer of the canon.  
The church is witness of the canon.  
The church is servant of the canon.

In the "Incorrect View" the authority of the Scriptures is based upon the authority of the church; the correct view is that the authority of the church is to be found in the authority of the Scriptures. The incorrect view places the church *over* the canon, whereas the proper position views the church *under* the canon. In fact, if in the column titled "Incorrect View," the word *church* be replaced by God, then the proper view of the canon emerges clearly. It is God who *regulated* the canon; man merely *recognized* the divine authority God gave to it. God *determined* the canon, and man *discovered* it. Louis Gaussen gives an excellent summary of this position:

**In this affair, then, the Church is a servant and not a mistress; a depository and not a judge. She exercises the office of a minister not of a magistrate.... She delivers a testimony, not a judicial sentence. She discerns the canon of the Scriptures, she does not make it; she has recognized their authenticity, she has not given it.... The authority of the Scriptures is not founded, then, on the authority of the Church: It is the church that is founded on the authority of the Scriptures. [Gaussen, 137]**

**Discovering Canonicity.** Appropriate methods must be employed to discover which books God determined to be canonical. Otherwise, the list of canonical books might be varied and incorrectly identified. Many procedures used in the study of the Old Testament canon have been marred by the use of fallacious methods.

*Inadequate Criteria for Canonicity.* Five mistaken methods have particularly troubled the

church (see Beckwith, 7-8):

1. failure to distinguish a book that was “known” from a book that carried God’s authority;
2. failure to distinguish disagreement about the canon between different parties from uncertainty about the canon within those parties;
3. failure to distinguish between the adding of books to the canon and the removal of books from it;
4. failure to distinguish between the canon that the community recognized and eccentric views of individuals;
5. failure to properly use Jewish evidence about the canon transmitted through Christian hands, either by denying the Jewish origins or by ignoring the Christian medium through which it has come (Beckwith, 7-8).

*Principles of Canonicity.* Granted that God gave authority and hence canonicity to the Bible, another question arises: How did believers become aware of what God had done? The accepted canonical books of the Bible themselves refer to other books that are no longer available, for example, the “Book of Jasher” (Josh. 10:13) and “the Book of the Wars of the Lord” (Num. 21:14). Then there are *Apocryphal* books and the so-called “lost books.” How did the Fathers know those were not inspired? Did not John (21:25) and Luke (1:1) speak of a profusion of religious literature? Were there not false epistles (2 Thess. 2:2)? What marks of inspiration guided the Fathers as they identified and collected the inspired books? Perhaps the very fact that some canonical books were doubted at times, on the basis of one principle or another, argues both for the value of the principle and the caution of the Fathers in their recognition of canonicity. It provides assurance that the people of God really included the books God wanted.

Five foundational questions lie at the very heart of the discovery process:

[1] *Was the book written by a prophet of God?* The basic question was whether a book was prophetic. Propheticity determined canonicity. A prophet was one who declared what God had disclosed. Thus, only the prophetic writings were canonic. Anything not written by a prophet of God was not part of the Word of God. The characteristic words “And the word of the Lord came to the prophet,” or “The Lord said unto,” or “God spoke” so fill the Old Testament that they have become proverbial. If substantiated these claims of inspiration are so clear that it was hardly necessary to discuss whether some books were divine in origin. In most cases it was simply a matter of establishing the authorship of the book. If it was written by a recognized apostle or prophet, its place in the canon was secured.

Historical or stylistic (external or internal) evidence that supports the genuineness of a prophetic book also argues for its canonicity. This was exactly the argument Paul used to defend his harsh words to the Galatians (Gal. 1:1-24). He argued that his message was authoritative because he was an authorized messenger of God, “an apostle not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father” (Gal. 1:1). He also turned the tables on his opponents who preached “a different gospel: which is really not another; only... to distort the gospel of Christ” (Gal. 1:6-7). His opponents’ gospel could not be true because they were “false brethren” (Gal. 2:4).

It should be noted in this connection that occasionally the Bible contains true prophecies from individuals whose status as people of God is questionable, such as Balaam (Num. 24:17) and Caiaphas (John 11:49). However, granted that their prophecies were consciously given, these prophets were not writers of Bible books, but were merely quoted by the actual writer. Therefore, their utterances are in the same category as the Greek poets

quoted by the apostle Paul (cf. Acts 17:28; 1 Cor. 15:33; Titus 1:12).

The arguments Paul used against the false teachers at Galatia were also used as grounds for rejecting a letter that was forged or written under false pretenses. One such letter is mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2:2. A book cannot be canonical if it is not genuine. A book might use the device of literary impersonation without deception. One writer assumes the role of another for effect. Some scholars feel such is the case in Ecclesiastes, if *Koheleth* wrote autobiographically as though he were Solomon (see Leupold, 8f.). Such a view is not incompatible with the principle, provided it can be shown to be a literary device and not a moral deception. However, when an author pretends to be an apostle in order to gain acceptance of his ideas, as the writers of many New Testament *Apocryphal* books did, then it is moral deception.

Because of this “prophetic” principle, 2 Peter was disputed in the early church. Even Eusebius in the fourth century said, “But the so-called second Epistle we have not received as canonical, but nevertheless it has appeared useful to many, and has been studied with other Scriptures” (Eusebius 1:193). On the basis of differences in the style of writing, it was felt by some that the author of 2 Peter could not be the same as the author of 1 Peter. But 2 Peter claimed to have been written by “Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:1). Thus, the epistle was either a forgery or there was great difficulty in explaining its different style. Those who were disturbed by such evidence doubted the genuineness of 2 Peter and it was placed among the antilegomena books for a time. It was finally admitted on the grounds that it was Peter’s genuine writing. The differences in style can be accounted for by the time lapse, different occasions, and the fact that Peter verbally dictated 1 Peter to an amanuensis (or secretary; see 1 Peter 5:13).

Inspiration was so certain in many prophetic writings that their inclusion was obvious. Some were rejected because they lacked authority, particularly the pseudepigrapha. These books provided no support for their claim. In many cases the writing is fanciful and magical. This same principle of authority was the reason the book of Esther was doubted, particularly since the name of God is conspicuously absent. Upon closer examination, Esther retained its place in the canon after the Fathers were convinced that authority was present, although less observable.

[2] *Was the writer confirmed by acts of God?* A miracle is an act of God to confirm the word of God given through a prophet of God to the people of God. It is the sign to substantiate his sermon; the miracle to confirm his message. Not every prophetic revelation was confirmed by a specific miracle. There were other ways to determine the authenticity of an alleged prophet. If there were questions about one’s prophetic credentials it could be settled by divine confirmation, as indeed it was on numerous occasions throughout Scripture (Exodus 4; Numbers 16-17; 1 Kings 18; Mark 2; Acts 5).

There were true and false prophets (Matt. 7:15), so it was necessary to have divine confirmation of the true ones. Moses was given miraculous powers to prove his call (Exod. 4:1-9). Elijah triumphed over the false prophets of Baal by a supernatural act (1 Kings 18). Jesus was attested to by miracles and signs God performed through him (Acts 2:22). As to the apostles’ message, “God was also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to his own will” (Heb. 2:4). Paul gave testimony of his apostleship to the Corinthians, declaring, “the signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles” (2 Cor. 12:12).

[3] *Does the message tell the truth about God?* Only immediate contemporaries had access to the supernatural confirmation of the prophet's message. Other believers in distant places and subsequent times had to depend on other tests. One such test was the *authenticity* of a book. That is, does the book tell the truth about God and his world as known from previous revelations? God cannot contradict himself (2 Cor. 1:17-18), nor can he utter what is false (Heb. 6:18). No book with false claims can be the Word of God. Moses stated the principle about prophets generally that

**If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, "Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them," you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. [Deut. 13:1-3]**

So any teaching about God contrary to what his people already knew to be true was to be rejected. Furthermore, any predictions made about the world which failed to come true indicated that a prophet's words should be rejected. As Moses said to Israel,

**And you may say in your heart, "How shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?" When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him. [Deut. 18:21-22]**

A prophet who made such false claims might be stoned. The Lord said, "The prophet who shall speak a word presumptuously in my name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he shall speak in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die" (Deut. 18:20). That kind of punishment assured no repeat performance by that prophet, and it gave other prophets pause before they said, "Thus says the Lord."

Truth in itself does not make a book canonical. This is more a test of *inauthenticity* of a book, rather than canonicity. It is a negative test that could eliminate books from the canon. The Bereans used this principle when they searched the Scriptures to see whether Paul's teaching was true (Acts 17:11). If the preaching of the apostle did not accord with the teaching of the Old Testament canon, it could not be of God.

Much of the *Apocrypha* was rejected because it was not authentic. The Jewish Fathers and early Christian Fathers rejected, or considered second-rate, these books because they had historical inaccuracies and even moral incongruities. The Reformers rejected some because of what they considered to be heretical teaching, such as praying for the dead, which 2 Maccabees 12:45 supports. The apostle John strongly urged that all purported "truth" be tested by the known standard before it be received (1 John 4:1-6).

The test of authenticity was the reason James and Jude have been doubted. Some have thought Jude inauthentic because it may quote inauthentic pseudepigraphical books (Jude 9, 14; see Jerome, 4). Martin Luther questioned the canonicity of James because it lacks an obvious focus on the cross. Martin Luther thought the book appeared to teach salvation by works. Careful study has cleared James of these charges, and even Luther came to feel better about them. Historically and uniformly, Jude and James have been vindicated and their canonicity recognized after they have been harmonized with the rest of Scripture.

(to be continued)

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